

W Y C O M B E
Wanderers fell to a 2-1 defeat on Saturday in the first of two successive matches that could decide the fate of the Rothmans Isthmian League title this season. The Blues were a little unlucky not to take a point away from Dagenham and they must now gear themselves to this week's home tie with Enfield.

This was obviously a key game for Wycombe, who last week deposed Dagenham at the top of Division One only to lose the leadership with this defeat. Victory would have put them four points clear but as it is, they now trail the Essex club by two points.

Saturday's defeat also completed a double reverse for the Blues who had lost 2-1 at home to the Daggers in September. It's a long time since any team beat Wycombe twice in a season.

By STUART EARP: Dagenham 2, Wycombe Wanderers 1

In the end many of their followers felt they should have shared the spoils and only the upright robbed them of a point in the closing stages with Dagenham 2-1 up.

Not surprisingly, manager Ted Powell made only one change from the side that overcame Croydon last Tuesday, bringing back goalkeeper John Maskell for Peter Spittle. This meant there was no place for Mick Hollifield, out for two games with a knee ligament injury.

Conditions at Victoria Road were far from easy but a well rolled pitch provided an extremely interesting contest between two of the most attacking sides in the league. The pitch cut up badly towards the end when the players also had to contend with driving rain.

CRACKING START

Wanderers got off to a cracking start with Peter Cruse leading the way from midfield. It was Cruse who played a major role in the first goal which came after seven minutes. He ran well

down the flank and then found Howard Kettleborough inside. He headed down to Tony Horseman whose shot was blocked but Ian Pearson made no mistake by tucking the loose ball into the net for his 21st goal of the season. Pearson went on to give a masterly display of skills in the first half.

Wycombe's joy, however, lasted only two minutes. That's how long it took the home side to get back on terms with a scrambled goal. John Borland's corner was headed against the bar by Joe Dunwell, Neville Fox suffered the same fate as the ball rebounded and there was a few seconds of hectic goalmouth action before Mal Harkins scrambled the ball over the line.

The pace continued throughout the first half with the ball flowing from end to end. Harkins was a constant threat to Wycombe with his surging, deceptive runs from deep positions one of which finished with a shot inches past the far post in the 14th minute. There was an immediate reply from Wanderers as John Priestley fired in a 20 yard drive that

Ian Huttley parried but Cruse, following up, could only find the side netting from an acute angle.

Then in the 25th minute Huttley produced the save of the match to foil Howard Kennedy. Pearson provided the pass on the flank and Kennedy cut in before unleashing a 25 yard rocket that was destined for the top corner until Huttley tipped the ball over the top. If anyone deserved a goal it was Kennedy who is unlikely to play a better game for the Blues. He was my man of the match, working harder than anyone else and taking on players with refreshing confidence.

It was as well for Wycombe that Kennedy was in such form, for neither Priestley nor Cruse were at their best in the second half. Wanderers also had problems up front where Pearson was too often a lone threat. Kettleborough had an unhappy game and was eventually replaced while Horseman spent long periods of anonymity on the wing. This meant that the Blues were restricted to only a handful of chances for the rest of the game.

Dagenham looked more dangerous and Terry Harris and Harkins both went close, Harris firing a shot into Maskell's midriff and Harkins shooting just wide.

There were no further goals before half time but both teams were given richly deserved applause as they left the field. The standard of football in the first half must have been as good as any seen at Victoria Road this season.

Wycombe began the new half with a great move that almost brought a goal for Horseman and in the early stages they pressed forward, making the most of Dagenham's frequent errors in passing. Whenever the home side did threaten, Alan Phillips or Keith Mead was there to keep them at bay. Both players enjoyed excellent games yet again.

Despite Dagenham's temporary lapse, however, the Blues were making little headway up front and the manager decided on a switch. He took off Kettleborough for Evans, a move that surprised me for Kettleborough is always the central man in their attacking moves. Although he was struggling against Dennis Moore and company, he was always likely to set up the odd chance here or there. Evans, playing with his hand strapped, was unable to make any impression on the home defence.

RARE MISTAKE

Two minutes after their substitution, Dagenham took a rather surprise lead, through a rare mistake by Maskell. Moore's long throw was headed out of the area to Borland who took a pot shot at goal through a mass of players. Maskell must have been unsighted for the ball skidded on the greasy surface and slipped under his body. 'Mask' would expect to save shots like that nine out of ten times.

Wanderers hit back with four corners in five minutes while Kennedy headed one effort just over the top and a Horseman shot cannoned off Huttley's body. From the last of these corners, Phillips headed straight at the 'keeper.

But the best chance of the lot came in the 85th minute. Pearson's cross was taken down by Horseman whose shot from close range was tipped onto an upright by Huttley. The ball could have gone anywhere but it came to rest a foot from the line and was coolly cleared by Jimmy Lye.

A goal then might have been justice but Dagenham held on to their lead for the last five minutes to go into the New Year top of the table.

DAGENHAM: I. Huttley; J. Lye, J. Dunwell, D. Moore, P. Currie; J. Borland, F. Saul, J. Holder; M. Harkins, N. Fox, T. Harris. Sub K. Gray (not used).

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell; P. Birdseye, K. Mead, A. Phillips, R. Davies; H. Kennedy, J. Priestley, P. Cruse, A. Horseman, H. Kettleborough (sub D. Evans 64 mins), I. Pearson.

Referee: E. Carter (Watford).

Half-time: 1-1. **Goalscorers:** Dagenham — Harkins (9), Borland (66) Wycombe — Pearson (7).